FDA's Advice: Know the Risks of Feeding Raw Foods to Your Pets

ood poisoning isn't only a human problem: our four-legged friends are also at risk if they eat foods that are contaminated with disease-causing bacteria. Two of these bacteria—Salmonella and Listeria monocytogenes—are particularly dangerous to both pets and humans. Here is one way to avoid them—and why.

Knowing the Risk to Your Pet

Raw pet food consists primarily of meat, bones, and organs that haven't been cooked, and therefore are more likely than cooked food to contain organisms that can make your dog or cat sick, says William J. Burkholder, DVM, PhD, Veterinary Medical Officer in the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) Division of Animal Feeds. Moreover, raw food can make you sick as well if you don't handle it properly. FDA does not believe feeding raw pet foods to animals is consistent with the goal of protecting the public from significant health risks.

The agency therefore recommends cooking of raw meat and poultry to kill harmful bacteria like Salmonella and Listeria monocytogenes before you give the food to your pets (www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/



UCM260394.pdf). And as always, when working with food, you should follow FDA's instructions on how to handle it safely (*www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm255180.htm*).

Salmonella bacteria are commonly found in such foods as raw or undercooked meat, poultry, eggs and egg products. Salmonella can also contaminate raw or unpasteurized milk and other dairy products, as well as raw fruits and vegetables.

Burkholder says people who choose a raw diet for their pets often point out that feral dogs and cats catch prey and eat it raw. "That's true," he adds, "but we don't know how many of these animals get sick or die as a result of doing that. Since sick feral animals are rarely taken to a veterinarian when they're ill, there's no way to collect that information."

Symptoms of salmonellosis in animals include:

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea (which may be bloody)
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Decreased activity level

Listeria bacteria are commonly found in uncooked meats, vegetables and unpasteurized milk and soft cheeses. Unlike most bacteria, Listeria like cold temperatures and can grow

"Feeding raw foods to pets increases the risk that both the pet and the people around the pet will encounter bacteria that cause foodborne illness, particularly if the products are not carefully handled and fed."

and spread in the refrigerator. So if you refrigerate *Listeria*-contaminated food, the germs not only multiply at the cool temperature, they could contaminate your refrigerator and spread to other foods there, increasing the likelihood that you and your family members would be exposed to *Listeria* and get sick.

Symptoms of listeriosis in animals include:

- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Fever
- Neurological disease can happen in a small percentage of situations

Raw Foods Can Also Affect Human Health

Consumers also run the risk of getting sick if they handle contaminated pet foods and accidentally transfer the bacteria to their mouths.

"If you're going to handle raw foods, you need to pay particular attention to good hygienic practices," Burkholder says. "Wash your hands and anything else that comes into contact with the product with hot, soapy water for at least 20 seconds."

Feeding raw food to a pet also increases the risk of contaminating food contact surfaces and other places.

"Even if the dog or cat doesn't get sick, they can become carriers of *Salmonella* and transfer the bacteria to their surroundings, and then people can get the disease from contact with the infected environment," Burkholder says.

Once Salmonella gets established

in the pet's gastrointestinal tract, the animal can shed the bacteria when it has a bowel movement, and the contamination will continue to spread.

Symptoms of Salmonella and Listeria Infection in Humans

Salmonella infection (salmonellosis) symptoms in humans include:

- Fever
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea (which may be bloody)
- Stomach pain
- More rarely: entry of Salmonella into bloodstream from intestines, followed by spread to joints, arteries, heart, soft tissues, and other areas of body

Symptoms associated with salmonellosis most often begin 12 hours to 3 days after ingestion of the bacteria and can last 4 to 7 days without treatment. All consumers are at risk for contracting salmonellosis from contaminated foods, but pregnant women, children under five, the elderly and those with weak immune systems are at risk of developing severe symptoms.

Compared to salmonellosis and other foodborne illnesses, infection with *Listeria monocytogenes* (listeriosis) is rare, but has serious and potentially fatal risks.

Listeria can infect multiple locations in the body:

- The brain
- Membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord

- Gastrointestinal tract
- Bloodstream

Symptoms associated with listeriosis begin 11 to 70 days after coming in contact with the bacteria, with a mean (or average) of 31 days, and they can last up to a few weeks. Listeriosis occurs almost exclusively in pregnant women and their fetuses, newborns, the elderly and those with weak immune systems. Listeriosis can cause life-threatening infection in a fetus and newborns, as well as in persons with weakened immune systems, although the infection can often be treated with antibiotics.

"Feeding raw foods to pets increases the risk that both the pet and the people around the pet will encounter bacteria that cause foodborne illness, particularly if the products are not carefully handled and fed," Burkholder says. "This is certainly one factor that should be considered when selecting diets for your pet."

Find this and other Consumer Updates at www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates

Sign up for free e-mail subscriptions at www.fda.gov/consumer/consumerenews.html